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## A PLEA FOR AN UNCENSORED PRESS <sup>1</sup>

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**W**E may now turn from diplomatic discussion to newspaper crudities, and discuss the subject which, gauged by hours, has taken more time in Washington since the declaration of war than any other. The House of Representatives is discussing it this morning and probably will be discussing it tomorrow morning. I am confident that nothing will be added to the plea for a liberal censorship that John Milton made several centuries ago. The morning topic, the need of better machinery for international negotiations, may properly include a discussion of censorship, though I approach it with a plea for the minimum censorship, and hence the least possible machinery. The punster's observation that the only ship whose loss we need not mourn is the censorship, expresses the view, not only of many progressive journalists, but of many thoughtful statesmen.

Eliminating from consideration the publication of strictly military or naval movements over which all recognize the need of censorship in war time, an impressive if not a convincing argument may be made that that government feels that a censorship is most valuable which has the most to conceal. President Wilson's argument that "there are some newspapers which cannot be relied upon to suppress information whose publication can be an injury" can be accepted without contradiction as a reason for censorship if it be assumed that "injury" means detriment to military or naval progress. It was merely unfortunate perhaps, that at about the same time when the President issued the statement, the newspapers should have been told by the Department of State, or rather, through

<sup>1</sup> Address delivered at the National Conference on Foreign Relations of the United States, held under the auspices of the Academy of Political Science, at Long Beach, N. Y., May 29, 1917.

the Committee on Public Information, that "The Department of State"—I am again quoting—"considers it a dangerous service to the enemy to discuss differences of opinion between the Allies and difficulties with neutral countries," and they added—I try to measure my words—with childish innocence, that "speculation about possible peace is another topic which may possess elements of danger, as peace reports may be of enemy origin, put out to weaken the combination against Germany."

That suggestion of the State Department caused the cabinet, in its fight for unlimited censorship, to lose the sympathy of its last newspaper supporter in the city of New York, as that newspaper gave up the fight this morning. If the cabinet carried that through, you could not hold this conference. Our State Department surely could not imagine a press that would not speculate about a possible peace; at least the Hohenzollerns have not suppressed such discussion in Germany, and surely the Romanoffs did not succeed. We may, perhaps, pass this cautionary suggestion of the State Department as ill digested—it must be.

Granted that a military censorship in war time is necessary, what further restriction of the press is desirable? I venture to assert that no additional precautions are desirable. I sarcastically express the hope that men holding public office will not announce that they have discovered some startling destroyer of submarines, and make other absurd statements. Up to date it seems to me that the greatest indiscretions committed in publicity since we declared war, were made in a speech in the Senate by the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, and by a gentleman who has the distinction of being the head of one of our advisory committees in the national defense movement. I presume to maintain then, that further regulation than military needs require is most likely to be injudicious. The veil of secrecy creates mistrust, and that chancellery is most generally believed which seeks to conceal the least.

Such statements seem absurdly simple when made. May I state a few instances of some possible interest? When Great Britain in the first year of the war appointed a diplomatic rep-

representative to the Vatican, the censor—the censor then was like the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*—“Off with their heads!”, or like the censor in Barrie’s play, dressed in black and carrying an axe, but saying nothing—the censor instructed the British press that he would not allow the publication of any comment upon this important appointment, but merely a simple announcement of three lines. Immediately the fact that there was no comment upon this unusual appointment created gossip. Men talked about it everywhere, and no less than twenty societies in one county in England deemed it worthy of heated, even acrimonious discussion, and many of them passed resolutions condemning the censorship for such action.

I talked with one of the most influential members of the British cabinet and asked him the reasons for the warning of the censor in this instance. In substance he said, “It is all incredibly stupid. Having established an elaborate machinery of suppression, some of my colleagues regard it as necessary to annoy and irritate as many people as possible. They may at any moment order that the prime minister’s speeches be suppressed.” Two weeks later, some British censor did actually delete certain portions of one of Mr. Asquith’s addresses which I endeavored to cable to the United States. I called it to Mr. Asquith’s attention, and he laughingly disavowed any intimate knowledge of the mental operations of the censors except to say, “It must be a very trying thing to be compelled to sit still and not be able to use the only two weapons you have, the blue pencil and the scissors.”

Turn to the Irish situation. When the effect of the treatment of the Irish press is carefully considered, one may learn a great deal as to why Erin has been the crucial test of the British union. Many have believed that political conditions in Ireland have not been so bad at all times as imagination has painted them, but that the censor has merely feared to let out the truth. I myself visited Ireland when most people in London believed that revolution was rampant. Dublin, Cork, Queenstown, Belfast, were as peaceful as I had ever seen them, but the censors were then forbidding journalists to write about conditions in Ireland.

Take the case of India. There were at the end of the first year of the war, countless rumors of sedition, mutiny, revolt and famine. They grew. Undoubtedly there was much truth in them. How much we did not know, but the mutiny of a hundred grew into the general supposition that it was a revolt of millions. After six months of effort, permission was obtained to send one trained American journalist to India, on condition that he could go where he pleased and write what he pleased, and that his articles should not be censored if they made no reference to military developments. So far as I know, he is the only foreign newspaper man who has visited India during the war. I would not wish to magnify too much the importance of his work, but I would point out that I personally have not heard a rumor of sedition or famine in India since his forty articles appeared. The difference of course is immediately suggested when we think of Armenia. There are no journalists in Armenia free to tell the uncensored truth.

Take a more recent instance in our own country. When diplomatic relations with Germany were severed, and of course before the declaration of war, the departure of Ambassador Gerard from Berlin was delayed by the circulation of reports that German ships had been seized in New York and other harbors of the United States, that German sailors had been interned, and that other similar belligerent acts had been committed. We can surmise how these inaccurate reports reached Germany. But meanwhile in New York the representative of the press association in Germany which corresponds most closely to the Associated Press here, was endeavoring to send by wireless to his own country the truth, which was, of course, that ships had not been seized, that no Germans had been interned, and that the policy of our government had been to extend every possible consideration to the hundreds of thousands of Germans in this country. The naval censor held that message up for several days. He, like Mr. Asquith's censor, sat there with his blue pencil and his scissors, and he had to do something.

A more recent instance: When Marshal Joffre's first announcement in this country was given to the press, it was

changed. The State Department declared that it was not responsible and that the only change was made by the members of the French Commission itself. The General Staff made a similar announcement. Both announcements were true, but they did not give the whole truth. I have compared the French text of the Marshal's remarks as cabled to France within a few hours of the completion of his remarks, with the version given to the American press after the change had taken place. Somebody had suggested a change. It was a stupid, if not a discourteous act. Sending American troops to France does not seem so radical a plan now as it did even a few weeks ago, and it might have been statesmanlike, even military, and surely it would have been more hospitable, to pretend that we could understand the French language which the Marshal of France used to express his undoubtedly sincere convictions.

The impairment of public confidence that goes with drastic censorship is incontrovertible. Golden Rule diplomacy and an unrestricted press, except in military matters, go necessarily hand in hand. When the Romanoff dynasty failed, the flow of truth stunned us. I could hardly credit it when there came in over the cables to our New York office, uncensored, from Petrograd, a reference to the former Czar as "the weakest of the Romanoffs," and the story of that dramatic visit to his prison which will send him down into history as the emperor who shoveled snow. Autocracy has failed there. Freedom may fail for a while, but the whole truth is now before us. There is no censorship in Petrograd. Even reckless speech may be a moderating influence, whereas drastic censorship chokes the safety valve. My plea then is simply for the least possible censorship machinery.